

Yours, Across the Years

by Clara Ashwick

He sent letters across time. She read them a century too late — or just in time.

MyTropes / RomanceBots

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Dear Editor,

I understand your publication specialises in the extraordinary. I am writing because I have an experience I cannot tell anyone I know, and I understand that anonymity here is guaranteed. I'll be as clear as I can, though I recognise that clarity and credibility are not always the same thing.

My name isn't important. What matters is this: last October, I fell through time. And I'd like to tell you about the man I met there.

I'm a historian. Architectural, specifically — I study Victorian domestic spaces, the way rooms were used, what that tells us about the people who lived in them. I was on-site at a house in Suffolk that was undergoing renovation, part of a conservation survey, doing the thing historians do which is stand very still in old rooms and wait for them to tell you something.

The house was built in 1871. The room I was standing in was a library. The light was the particular October light that comes through old glass — watery, slanted, almost amber. I put my hand on the window frame. The glass was original, I knew it from the slight imperfections. Cold under my palm.

Then the room shifted. Not dramatically. Not a flash of light or a tornado or anything cinematic. More like the moment when an eye adjusts to a different register of dark — a quiet internal recalibration, and then suddenly the room looked slightly different, and the smell was different (woodsmoke, real and present, rather than the ghost of it), and when I turned around the renovation tarps were gone.

I stood very still for a moment.

A man was standing in the doorway.

He was tall. Dark-coated, waistcoat, the side-parted hair of an 1880s photograph come to life. Thirty-something, I'd have guessed — though I was also recalibrating fairly rapidly. He was holding a book and looking at me

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with the exact expression of a person who has just discovered someone in a room who should not be there.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "I believed the house was empty."

"It is," I said, and then: "I'm—I think I'm in the wrong year."

He looked at me for a long time. At my clothes, which were wrong in about fifteen ways. At my face.

"The window," he said.

"Yes."

He walked to it. Looked at the glass. Looked back at me with an expression that had moved from startled to something more measured, like a man who encountered improbable things and applied empiricism to them.

"It's happened before," he said. "In this room."

"To you?"

"To others. I inherited accounts with the house." He set his book down. "You're from—"

"A long way forward."

"How far?"

I told him. He absorbed this.

"You'll want to sit down," he said. "It takes a moment to steady."

His name was Edmund Fairfax. He was the son of the house, the library his particular domain, which explained why he'd come in at — I checked my phone, which still worked as a clock even without signal — 4:23 on an October afternoon. He was not afraid of me. He found me interesting in the considered way of a man who had grown up with an account in the family papers of a woman who had appeared in this room in 1834 and stayed

three days before the window returned her.

He fed me. He found me clothes that were slightly less conspicuous than my jeans and fieldwork jacket, in the form of a dress belonging to his deceased mother that he offered without ceremony and I accepted with equal pragmatism. He explained the house's other occupants (a housekeeper and her husband, both easily managed) and gave me the library for sleeping, which was the room most likely to return me.

I stayed for four days.

This is the part I find hardest to explain cleanly, so I'll try for the essence: Edmund Fairfax in 1887 was the most straightforwardly honest person I had spoken to in years. Not naive. Not simple. Honest in the way of someone who had thought carefully about what mattered and arrived at truth as the most efficient mechanism. He asked me about the future — not for the things you'd expect, the wars and the technologies. He asked what we'd learned. Whether we were kinder. What we'd understood about the world that he couldn't see from where he stood.

I answered as carefully as I could. He listened the way people listen when they're actually updating rather than waiting for their turn to speak.

I asked him things. He answered. His work — he was a botanist, specifically ferns, which I found endearing in a way I didn't explain. The house. His father. The particular quality of the light in this county in late October that he could describe in three sentences that I was going to remember for a long time.

By the third day I understood that I was in trouble, romantically speaking, which was profoundly inconvenient given the situation.

By the third night he understood the same thing.

I want to be transparent with your readers, as you've asked contributors to be: I won't write about what happened between us in clinical detail, but I'll be honest that it happened and that it was the specific kind of thing that occurs when two people have been talking for three days with the knowledge that time is finite and dishonesty is wasteful.

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He was — well. He was Edmund. Careful and certain at the same time, which is the combination. Present in the specific way of someone who has decided to be completely present rather than managing distance. He said my name in the dark like it meant something more than syllables, and I held it because I knew I was leaving.

"You'll go back," he said.

"Yes."

"Will you remember this the same way?"

"I'll remember it exactly," I said. "Too exactly."

He was quiet for a moment. Outside, the Suffolk dark, unchanged across a hundred and forty years.

"Will you—" He stopped. Started again. "If the window works in both directions. If there is a mechanism."

"Edmund," I said.

"I know," he said. "I'm a practical man. I know."

"I'll try," I said.

He turned his head and looked at me in the dark.

"That's enough," he said. "That's more than enough."

I came back through the window the next afternoon, alone. The room shifted back to the present with the same quiet un-drama as before. The renovation tarps. My phone reconnecting. The October light through the same old glass.

I stood in the library for a long time.

I went home. I filed my conservation report. I did not write about the four days. I thought about Edmund Fairfax for approximately every available

spare moment for the following three weeks, which is not a productive state for a working historian.

Then I went back.

It took me six months and the specific resources of someone who studies old houses for a living, but I found the account he'd mentioned — a hand-copied journal entry from 1834, a woman named Cecily who had come through the window and stayed three days and left a pressed fern between the pages. Edmund's great-great-grandmother had written at the bottom: *E says the room knows what it's doing. I am inclined to believe him.*

I booked a return access visit to the house. I stood at the window. I put my hand on the glass.

The room shifted.

He was sitting at the library desk when I came through, as though he'd expected this, which I suspect on some level he had. He looked up. Something in his face that I have no better word for than relief.

"You came back," he said.

"I said I'd try," I said.

He stood. Crossed the room. Took both my hands.

"How long?" he said.

"I don't know how long I have before it takes me back," I said. "But I intend to find out how far the mechanism extends. The 1834 account—"

"I know the account."

"If it works consistently—"

"Cecily came through four times," he said. "The last time she stayed."

I looked at him.

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"She's buried in the churchyard in the village," he said. "1834 to 1901. Sixty-seven years in this century."

I looked at our hands, his and mine, two different times.

"Edmund," I said.

"I know," he said. "I know what I'm asking."

"I haven't said yes yet."

"No," he said. And waited.

Outside: Suffolk, October, the amber light through old glass. Behind me: my century, my career, my flat, all the furniture of a life arranged without him.

"Ask properly," I said.

He did.

I said yes.

— *Name withheld, Suffolk*

P.S. I understand you publish these anonymously. I'd like to maintain that. His descendants still own the house and I'd rather they heard it from us directly. In about seventy years, we intend to tell them.